



### **Emerging from the Undertow of Alzheimer's: A Daughter's Reflection on Disease and Spirit**

I would like to help you see Alzheimer's a little differently—in a way that might give you and your loved ones more peace.

Anyone dealing with this disease faces a lot of fear and anger. The loss of one's self is utterly terrifying. But consider this—Alzheimer's is a *physical* disease. It is *not* a *spiritual* disease. And that is what I want to talk about.

Let's start with how we presently look at Alzheimer's. Bring up this subject in any conversation, anywhere and you'll hear—or say: "It is awful. A dreadful disease. Terrifying. Expensive. Unrelenting. SAD. And anyone seeing a person in the last stages uses words like: "Lights out. Vegetative. Gone."

All of these descriptions define the *physical* expression of the disease. And no one—certainly not me—would make light of the physical suffering, the caregiver's burden, or the cost of this disease.

But now, let's just change the story a little bit. Let's insert some different words. Metamorphosis. Transformation. Emergence from body to spirit. Amazing. Inspiring.

Does that sound utterly insane? Probably to most of you right now—yes. That’s what I very likely would have said if asked when my mother embarked on her journey of Alzheimer’s. Certainly *she* would have used the words horrible, awful, dreadful, frightening. But I think in the end, she might have added, WOW!

So let’s take some time to meet my mother. Elsie Julia Elizabeth Norlund was born in Duluth to 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Finns, and left as a child on her grandparent’s farm in Finlayson, Minnesota in a household that spoke no English at all. She went to school in a covered wagon. She graduated as valedictorian of her class of 17. Yet with only a high school degree, she ended up flying on Air Force One—called Two when the President was not aboard—as a Protocol Officer for the State Department. She met queens and presidents, popes and astronauts. She kept a memory full of funny stories—the time helicopter blades blew the petals off the bouquet Jacqueline Kennedy was supposed to hand to another first lady, the time she mistook Nixon for hotel staff, the time she ended up in Life magazine.

Her most prized ability as a Protocol Officer was her incredible attention to detail, and her memory—which is precisely what she lost.

As her primary caregiver, I went through every transition with her. The anger phase. The stealing phase. The confusion stage. The inappropriate behavior phase. Like every caregiver, I learned the physical stages of decline very well. Sometimes I *wanted* her to get worse because she’d be easier to take care of—that is the burden of the worn out caregiver. And for the most part, she was in assisted living, except for a period when she was in my home near the last year of her life.

But the more she lost ground mentally, the more transcendent she seemed to become. Perhaps the most shocking experience occurred on one *Monday* afternoon. She awoke from her nap. Virtually non-verbal by now, speaking gibberish for the most part, she said clear as a bell—“I can’t stop him. He won’t listen to me.” “Who?”

asked the aide, Hawa. “My brother,” she answered before sinking back into her confusion.

On Tuesday we received a call. Her brother had died on MONDAY. He was passing over; and Mom had seen him. For the first time, I had concrete proof of what I had been suspecting—Mom crossed back and forth from a spirit world where she could visit with deceased friends and family—and her physical world.

Indeed, I had one other interesting experience. Mom gestured across the room one day saying, “There’s Eddie and Wayne.” Eddie, an old family friend, had died years earlier—and Mom of course knew that before the onset of her disease. But Wayne, his son, died after Alzheimer’s had erased virtually all of Mom’s memory, so we never bothered to tell her. Yet she adamantly, and with irritation, repeatedly said, “He’s right THERE.”

On many occasions she’d mention names. Never once were they among the living. She never gestured toward the ceiling or wall and said, “There’s my daughter, or grandson, or living friend. Only the dead.

At one point, she fell and broke her hip as a result of her extreme osteoporosis. The doctor predicted that most likely she’d die within the year because the combination of Alzheimer’s and broken hip are particularly fatal. I felt shocked and scared at the thought of losing her. I walked into her rehab room. Her diaper stank of urine. Her head lolled over to one side, straining her neck muscles. Her cold congealed oatmeal stood untouched on her bedside table. *Of course she’ll die, I thought, of starvation and neglect.*

It was at this moment I think that for the first time I felt as though our two souls connected. With an absolute certainty, I sensed that she was not ready to go yet, and that somehow I’d know when the time was right. But I had to buy her time until that moment arrived. So that’s when I brought her into my home.

Now let me talk about a way of looking at what was happening to my mother. Consider the caterpillar. When it goes into its cocoon, it becomes literally mush. From the caterpillar's perspective, if it could think about what was happening, it would feel this "disease" was absolutely as dreadful as Alzheimer's. Yet, of course, we know what happens. The caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

What if the person experiencing memory loss is being allowed a very slow transition to spirit. They are being given the gift of time. Lots of it. Perhaps they aren't ready to say good-bye to this world—and are afraid of the next. Mom felt that way.

Alzheimer's in many respects allows one's wisdom to continue for some time, even as specific memories fade. My mother offered sage advice about raising my daughters long after she forgot what she'd eaten a few minutes earlier. But yes, eventually in the last years, the one you love seems to disappear.

Well, to continue the story, I believed Mom's *soul* was entirely intact, totally unaffected by the disease. I am referring to the essence-of-Elsie, the part that is not ego, not brain, but that which we all sense within us—that "more" that we believe continues on, even after death.

I talked to her, always, in a totally normal way—as though her soul were hovering over her body. This was not just an assumption or a wish. It felt as real to me as love between two people. I also enjoyed the silence between us because it felt so rich.

But I am a curious person. I like to explore boundaries. One day I visited Mom when she was in assisted care. Her verbal skills were very minimal by this time. As I stepped into the room and looked at her, her face startled me. It seemed something awful had happened. Either she was in a terrible nightmare, or in physical pain—and I had no way of knowing which.

I didn't know what to do, but I felt frantic to do *something*. Then I remembered my friend Kenna—a medical intuitive. In my panic, I wondered if she could telepathically connect with my mother to find out what was wrong. I dashed out and called her. She connected—as she says, kind of like Dr. Spock on Star Trek—and introduced herself to Mom. At that moment, Mom faced the terrible specter of death and she was terrified. She felt so lost—she didn't know where she was—like being in a soupy fog. Kenna was able to explain to her what was happening, and even how to look for her angels. Mom wasn't too interested in angels, but she did calm down.

After that, my sister and I decided to have Kenna telepathically visit our mother once a month. We didn't know. Maybe it was all rubbish—but why not try and see what Elsie had to say.

As time went on, we began to involve Mom in decisions—not with the belief we have in talking to people of sound mind—but more for us to learn what we could of the difference between the healthy functioning of her soul, and the diseased non-functioning of her brain.

She talked about how she loved to dance. True. How she loved to play the piano. True. How she preferred flying to boats, but her husband preferred boats to flying. True.

And this is how it continued to the end. Kenna was with her just before she died—and just after. Before she let go, she made it very clear to Kenna that she wouldn't hang around to be in pain. She'd rather die. And she did.

That evening, I was 3000 miles away. I knew she would not live through the night. I asked, from my soul to her soul, *Let me know somehow*. I would not believe the following story if my daughter hadn't been with me.

Seeing me in almost complete collapse, she suggested we go to an all-night diner. It was in the wee hours of the morning. We got there and it was surprisingly crowded. As we sat down, a young man tapped me on the shoulder. "Would you sing for us?" Their table seemed to be missing, and there were four people and three chairs. Lisa explained to me, "They want to play musical chairs." As bizarre as this was, it seemed perfectly normal to me because I was completely so completely crazed with grief. So I began to sing. When only a woman and man were left, I closed my eyes because I'd always favor the woman. The man won the last chair. "What time is it?" I asked my daughter. "2:30 AM" she answered.

The next morning my sister called. Mom had died at 11:30 PM Seattle time—2:30 AM our time. Her soul had let me know—she didn't need her chair any more.

Kenna connected with her hours after her death. She was ecstatic. "Why did I wait so long?" she wondered. "Everything works. My mind, my legs. You know what I mean, Kenna."

She had become a butterfly.

I tell this story because I feel her journey was remarkable. True it was not a journey she wanted to take. Absolutely not. But slowly, she experienced what it would be like to be an enspirited soul rather than an embodied soul. That is the strange story of the Alzheimer's disease. What seems to be absolutely awful—the caterpillar turning to icky mush in its cocoon—may actually be the most transcendent experience a human being can have while still on earth.

My advice to those with Alzheimer's and caregivers? Be open. Explore. And never ever believe the soul has been damaged or diseased in any way. We are not yet comfortable or familiar with ways to communicate telepathically—but perhaps it's time to open these doors. If I hadn't known Kenna; if Mom hadn't tried to stop her

brother Swante from passing over; if I hadn't *sensed* that Mom's soul was intact, whole and untouched by this disease, I doubt I would have written a book about what happened.

I called it **Elsie at Ebb Tide** because of a favorite family photo. In it, she stands in water lapping up on shore. She is wearing a blue-and-white flowered dress. She looks back towards the shore where she has written her name, Elsie, in gigantic cursive letters in the sand. She doesn't know—but we know—that just as the tide will wash out her name, Alzheimer's will wash away her mind. But the subtitle, **Emerging from the Undertow of Alzheimer's**, suggests something different. That there's another story, a different story, a hidden story—some hope in the seeming horror of this disease.

I have such compassion for those struggling not only with dementia but any disease that affects and limits the mind—where we feel we are cut off from loved ones. Personally, I'd say consider psychic connection. I'd recommend having two or three psychics connect at different times—keeping the questions somewhat the same. I believe you'll know if the connection seems authentic. Invariably peculiar personal characteristics, manners of speaking, and other traits come through—even though the psychic has to translate the information through their own psychological, personal, and cultural stratas.

The last time I saw my mother alive, six weeks before she died, was in Seattle. I kneeled beside her, tears running down my cheeks. She took my arms in her bony grasp, and gazed straight into my eyes. Her eyes were *not* lights OUT. They were lights ON. I felt as though I were looking *through* her into heaven itself—the light of her soul now skilled in the ways of spirit.

Once again, she was lighting the way for me.